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Senate passes Kuipers' graduation-requirement plan

LANSING — The Senate today approved legislation that puts Michigan at the forefront of efforts to create rigorous statewide high-school graduation requirements so young people leave school ready for the 21st century.

"It's time Michigan rethinks what's required of high school graduates," said Sen. Wayne Kuipers, R-Holland, sponsor of the bill. "Our graduation standards are well behind those of other states, but with these standards we'll move to the front of the class."

The legislation would require students to take four years, or equivalent credit, of English and math; three of science and social studies; and one year of an arts course as well as a health and physical-education course. Additionally, students would have to take biology, geometry and Algebra I and II, among other specific course requirements.

In one key difference from the House plan, senators backed a two-year foreign-language requirement that could be fulfilled anytime between kindergarten and graduation.

"The 21st century economy demands new skills and training," said Kuipers, chairman of Senate Education Committee. "What worked for my generation and my parents' generation won't work for our children. This plan sends the message that Michigan is open for business and ready for the jobs of tomorrow."

Kuipers logged almost 3,000 miles in travel to nine hearings across the state that included members of the Senate Education Committee and local lawmakers. At the hearings, lawmakers listened to more than 24 hours of testimony from more than 200 people.

"Preparing our children for a bright future means preparing them to compete in a national and global economy that is very different than anything we've known before," said Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema, R-Wyoming. "We have worked hard in the Senate to listen to all sides on this issue and incorporate many ideas to improve upon Michigan's high school curriculum. Today, we maintained our commitment to moving this legislation quickly while making sure it is effective."

After the state superintendent and State Board of Education proposed graduation requirements beyond the half year of civics class now required, state lawmakers immediately began giving the board's proposal careful consideration.

Lawmakers now will begin working out the differences between the Senate and House versions.